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## SALVAGING FROM THE ENGLISH SCRAP-HEAP

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Every aggressive English teacher would like to hit upon a device for stamping out illiteracy in his classes, but none wishes to pay an exorbitant price in eyes and nerves. No English teacher even dreams of the paradise which the *Cleveland Citizen* discusses in an editorial headed "Hell in Russia." The writer says that in Moscow laborers are required to be out of the building six hours after beginning work, are subject to a heavy fine for working overtime, set their own wages, and ride in the most expensive limousines. Instead, the average English teacher would count his lot fortunate if he could find in the day enough hours to do his full duty by his pupils and also preserve his health, intellect, and humanity by means of moderate quantities of sleep, reading, study, fresh air, and recreation.

Therefore even an ancient device for the salvation of pupils from illiteracy may deserve careful testing. Dictation has been crowded out of the English work of the American high school by after-dinner speaking, conversation exercises, short-story writing, problems, projects, and other modern exercises. The French teachers of the mother-tongue, however, universally employ dictation. The fact that the French have a well-developed language conscience and speak and write their mother-tongue accurately and forcefully indicates that perhaps dictation does not belong among the English-teaching discards but deserves a place beside conversation exercises and project-teaching.

Specifically, Professor Brown's *How the French Boy Learns to Write* suggests that, if dictation is valuable in teaching grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence structure, and choice and use of words, the occasional substitution of a dictation for a composition might save teacher-energy without reducing efficiency. Dictation, if an efficient exercise, is a time- and eye-

economizer for the teacher, because the best 15 per cent of the average class as student critics or assistant teachers will recheck dictations accurately at home if they understand just what they are to do. For several reasons it is wise to have the papers passed in class and the errors first checked there. No one maintains that pupil criticism of composition is a substitute for teacher criticism; and the experiment reported by Colvin indicates that composition writing without criticism is a waste of time.

To test the efficiency of dictation in teaching written composition, I began in September a first experiment. Two 2A (first half of second year) classes were approximately equal in size and ability. During the first week of the term I assigned "Why Germany Must Be Beaten" as the subject of a composition to be written in class the next day and suggested that there are distinct advantages in making a favorable first impression. I told the pupils also that I wanted to find out what they had learned about English in grammar school and the first year of high school and to know whether they really belonged in the 2A grade or were there by mistake. The pupils accepted the challenge, prepared at home for the composition, and worked energetically during the twenty-five minutes of class writing. The compositions varied in length from 80 to 281 words.

In tabulating results I neglected nice distinctions and counted only errors upon the marking of which English teachers would probably not differ. The errors tabulated fall under the following heads: manuscript, spacing, omission, wordiness, digression, paragraph unity, paragraph coherence, spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, sentence unity, sentence coherence, emphasis, fragment of sentence, running-on fault, repetition of word or idea, wrong word, awkwardness, lack of clearness, mistake in fact, word wrongly divided at end of line. Throughout the experiment each composition was marked twice on different days. The results were:

	Number of Pupils	Total Words Written	Total Errors
Class A. . . . .	23	3,612	229
Class B. . . . .	21	3,496	221

During the term, in class B I assigned ten compositions, had them criticized by pupils, then carefully re-marked them, required the re-writing of unsatisfactory compositions, the revision of passing work, and the filing of all completed work in individual folders in the theme cabinet. In other words, the generally approved methods of teaching written composition were followed.

In class A, however, for seven of the themes I substituted dictations. To avoid an unwarranted inference, it may be well to interject that this is a larger proportion of dictation than anyone would advocate. For the experiment, however, it seemed wise to put dictation to the extreme test. The dictations were selected from the textbooks in the pupils' possession. Approximately half were illustrative selections or explanations in the composition text. In the assignment the pupils were told, for example, that the dictation would be several paragraphs of the story on pages 26, 27, and 28 and were instructed in methods of preparing for a dictation. In class the passage selected was first read entire, then read sentence by sentence as the pupils copied, and then read rapidly. Each dictation filled about a page of composition paper. Papers were then passed for correction. Possible variations from the spelling, punctuation, or capitalization of the text were indicated on the blackboard. Each pupil with book open totaled the errors on the paper in his possession. Occasionally the papers were passed again for rechecking. Commonly, however, the rechecking was done at home by the class critics. When the criticized dictation was returned to the pupil, he made the corrections, wrote on the opposite side of the paper each punctuation rule violated, and filed the perfect paper in his folder in the theme cabinet.

As the dictation required only half of the composition period, the other half was spent in oral composition. The pupils were required to prepare outlines for all speeches. The topic was often the same as that assigned for written composition in class B.

As a test of progress, I had both classes write during the last week of the term on the subject "What the United States Gained by the War." The first composition of the term was numbered 301; the last one, 312. The procedure was just what has been outlined for number 301 except that in the assignment it was

explained that each pupil must write at least as many words as he wrote in number 301. The girl who wrote only 80 words in number 301 had 80 words as her minimum, and the boy who wrote 281 words had 281 words as his minimum.

In checking errors this time I read in each pupil's theme only the minimum word requirement. Miss R's composition number 301 had 167 words; hence I read 167 words of number 312 and stopped. Consequently the total words of the class for number 312 and the total words for each pupil are the same as for number 301.

The tabulation showed the improvement indicated.

	Class A (dictation)	Class B
Number of pupils.....	23	23
Total words in each test composition.....	3,612	3,496
Number of errors in 301.....	229	221
Number of errors in 312.....	152	151
Percentage of improvement...	34	32

The totals indicated that the class had not suffered by the substitution of dictation and oral composition for seven written compositions.

#### PERCENTAGE OF IMPROVEMENT IN DETAIL

	Class A	Class B
Punctuation.....	13	46
Spelling.....	37	22
Capitalization.....	29	88
Grammar.....	9	6
Paragraph unity and coherence..	93	81
Sentence coherence.....	31	67
Fragment of sentence and running-on fault.....	85	75
Wrong word.....	52	39
Spacing.....	75	50

An examination of the scores of individuals makes clear the reason for some contradictions and variations. For example, K of class A, who knows little about capitalization, by good fortune made no error on 301 but on 312 contributed 6 of the 12 capitalization errors of the class. Then doubtless influenza is responsible for some irregularities.

The second experiment was a test of the improvement in a week in nine written composition minimum essentials: punctuation,

spelling, capitalization, spacing, letter form, avoidance of fragment of sentence, avoidance of running-on fault, paragraph unity, and paragraph coherence. Of these, punctuation, spelling, capitalization, spacing, and letter form are exclusively written composition problems. Some teachers consider paragraph unity, paragraph coherence, and freedom from the sentence fragment and running-on fault primarily written matters. Others maintain that oral composition is only a pastime if attention is not always paid to building sentences and paragraphs. Most teachers believe that composition faults other than the nine enumerated may be cured as quickly and as permanently by oral as by written methods.

Classes X and Y are made up of 4B (second half of fourth year) pupils. The test compositions were numbers 801 and 806; the practice exercises, 802-805. The method of assigning and writing the compositions and the dictation procedure were the same as in the first experiment. The time for composition writing, however, in the test compositions was twenty-two minutes. Also each pupil was required to write at least one hundred and fifty words and understood that he would be marked on only one hundred and fifty words.

Both test compositions were letters. Number 801 was a letter of advice to a third-year high-school pupil who had just been offered a position as office boy by the Murray Oil Company. The salary was ten dollars a week. The company is interested in boys and gives an employee a chance to rise as high as his ability and energy will carry him. Some employees of the company earn from \$5,000 to \$20,000 a year. The second was a reply to a friendly letter asking advice about the occupation, business, or profession the inquirer, a high-school Senior, should enter.

The practice exercises in class X were dictations; in class Y, compositions. One dictation and one composition were friendly letters. The dictations were marked entirely by pupils. The compositions were marked first by pupils in class and then carefully remarked each evening by the teacher. In both classes one of the five practice days was assigned for drill on words frequently misspelled by the pupils. A part of the work on the other four days was a review of the rules or principles of capitalization, punctuation, spelling, paragraph unity, paragraph coherence, and letter form.

Because the assignment, correction, and reading aloud of compositions required more time each day than was used for the dictation, the drill time in class X was longer than in class Y.

### IMPROVEMENT IN A WEEK

	Class X (dictation)	Class Y
Total pupils.....	36	31
Total words.....	$36 \times 150 =$ 5,400	$31 \times 150 =$ 4,650
Total errors on 801.....	240	222
Total errors on 806.....	108	106
Percentage of improvement....	55	52

### PERCENTAGES OF IMPROVEMENT IN DETAIL

	Class X	Class Y
Punctuation.....	41	36
Spelling.....	54	54
Capitalization.....	60	57
Paragraph unity and coherence.	32	40
Fragment of sentence and running-on fault.....	33	0
Spacing.....	85	56
Letter form.....	92	85

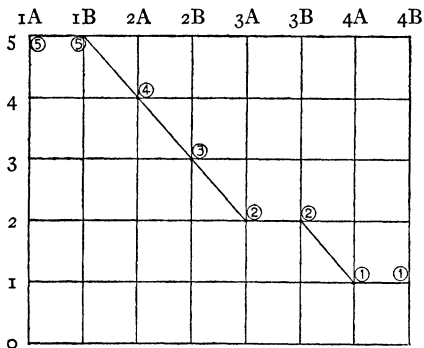
Here the detailed distribution is much more regular than in the first experiment.

The two experiments seem to prove that wisely conducted dictation is an efficient exercise in the teaching of written composition. Undoubtedly also dictation exercises set standards of accuracy and clean-cut thinking and expression and thus help to develop an English conscience. Hence the experiments suggest a substantial saving of teacher-energy, with no loss to the pupil, if a dictation is sometimes substituted for the regular composition; and a substantial gain to the pupil if dictation exercises supplement the required compositions. The experiments indicate also that, again without loss to the pupil, written composition may be reduced to a minimum if oral composition is intelligently and enthusiastically taught and is supplemented by dictation exercises.

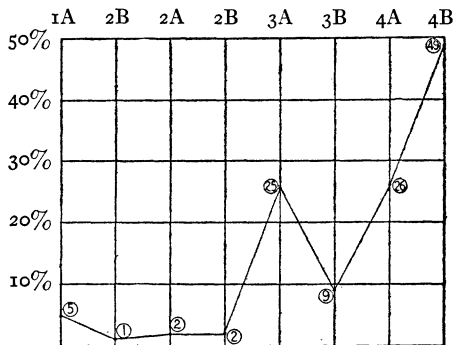
Dictation is valuable also in testing ability in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and division into sentences and paragraphs. Such a test because it presents a life-problem appeals to the child more than spelling a list or quoting punctuation or capitalization

rules. The test also teaches indirectly sentence structure, grammar, English idiom, principles of writing, and word choice.

Finally, dictation is an easily standardized form of test in English composition fundamentals. To illustrate, the dictation test on



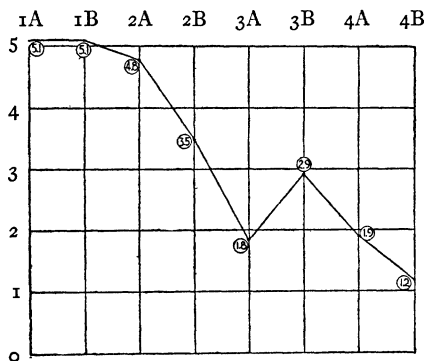
Median number of errors (Dictation about George Washington).



Percentage of perfect papers (Dictation about George Washington).

page 60 of Brown's *How the French Boy Learns to Write* was given to all the pupils of the Newton High School. The variations from the text permitted by Professor

Brown were accepted: *president* or *President* in the first line and comma or no punctuation after *late* and *watch*. The results are pictured in the accompanying charts.



Average number of errors (Dictation about George Washington).

If other high schools gave this dictation and tabulated results, the combined result would be a standardized test like a Courtis arithmetic test. With it, in a few minutes a teacher could tell

whether her class or individuals in the class were up to grade in punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and division into sentences and paragraphs. Thus would be established one scientific measure of ability to set against the widely varying teacher composition marks. Other standardized tests would speedily follow.